

Exodus (17:8-13)

Psalm 62

1 Corinthians 12:12-22

Matthew 25: 14-30

Jesus does not mince words. I would have felt sorry for the poor bloke with the one talent. You would have felt sorry for him. But Jesus does not:

As for this worthless slave,
throw him into the outer darkness,
where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

AS ever the language is extravagant and extreme. But the meaning is clear. Jesus wants us to use what we have and it is better to take risks than to play safe.

The word talent presents us with a strange difficulty. The Greek word that Matthew uses is *ταλαντα*, which was first a measure of weight and then the denomination of a coin. I suppose that was rather similar to the way that for us a pound also became a coin. So the parable as Jesus told it was, on the surface, about money.

Now it could be interpreted as being a parable about how we use money but it is usually not treated so literally. It is generally interpreted as being about how we use our gifts in the widest sense including talents in the modern meaning of the word.

So Jesus is saying that God has given us gifts and talents and we are responsible for showing how we have used them. But the message is even stronger than that – he is saying that not to use them will be obstructing God's purposes and that we will have to answer for that failure. It is harder to think of a stronger statement.

Perhaps the reason he expresses himself so strongly is that using our talents is, in a sense, a matter of faith. In part it is a matter of having faith in ourselves. But more fundamentally it is a matter of having faith in God. I am made in the image of God. The talents I have are gifts

from God. And if I do trust the gifts that God has given me then I am not trusting God. To put it the other way round, I can trust the gifts that God has given me because they are gifts from him. And they are given to use. Sometimes the gifts that God gives us are likened to tools. It is a helpful image because tools are made to do a job. Spades are made for digging. Cars are made for driving. Pens are made for writing. And if they are left forever in the tool shed, the garage or the desk drawer, then they are being abused. What is more because the gifts are not being used there is a job, a ministry, which is not being done. A garden is not dug. A journey is not made. A letter is not written.

Part of the sermon on the mount is relevant here:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Matthew 7:7-11

If there is a job to be done then Jesus will give us the gifts; Jesus will give us the tools for the job.

And the tools for the job are scattered round the congregation. To change the image, Paul uses the picture of the human body. The body has many parts – arms, legs, eyes nose. Each has a distinctive role; each is necessary; no part can substitute for another. Paul is making clear that church life is like this. Each one of us has a part to play, some more prominent, some less so, but each matters and none can be dispensed with. And those who assert that they are more important are wrong. And those who claim to be unimportant are wrong as well.

But perhaps the most important point is that gifts are diverse. No-one blames a leg for not being able to hear. No one blames an eye because it

cannot speak. In the same way each gift in church life has a place: some people will have very public or prominent ministries: others will work behind the scenes. Some people will have ministries which are demanding intellectually; others will have ministries which are demanding emotionally; others which are practical or time consuming. And all play a part.

And the ministries we exercise are determined by two things: the need and the gift. The starting point is always the need. In the book of Acts the first deacons were ordained because there was a need for men to look after the distribution of food and prevent squabbling. In our own congregation we need people to read in church, to visit baptism families, to take communion to those who are housebound. What happens next is that we attempt to match the need to the gifts available. Sometimes there is perfect match. Sometimes the match is less obvious but people rise to the occasion. In part that is because many people are willing to have a go. In part it is because that is how God works, there is a need so God gives us gifts:

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Matthew 7:11

That is the principal reason why I am here today.

But the process of matching up needs and gifts is quite time consuming and quite demanding. In the secular world there is a process: you identify the job to be done; you identify the kind of person needed to do it and then you advertise and ask people to apply.

Much the same process can be carried out in the church. And we are currently advertising two posts – Church Hall Booking Secretary and Church Hall Verger.

But asking people to apply is not always the most appropriate method of recruitment. There are two drawbacks, the first is that no-one may apply and the job may be unfilled. The second is that unsuitable people may

apply and will have to be turned down. And in a church community where everyone knows everyone else that may be hurtful.

But in fact the church has traditionally used a different way of encouraging ministry: not seeking volunteers but discerning vocations. You see some people are very aware of their gifts and very confident in putting themselves forward. But others may be aware of their own gifts but lacking in the confidence to offer them. Others may not even be aware that they are good at certain kinds of ministry, or that the skills they possess mark them out in any way. Or they may not be aware that there is a need which they can meet.

Over the next week or so I would like to ask you to do two things. Each member of this congregation will be given two lists of jobs, ministries that need to be done in this church. One list seeks volunteers. Please look at your own gifts and abilities and try to discern what you have to offer and how you can meet the needs of the church. Tick the boxes, add your name and return to me or the churchwardens.

The other list seeks suggestions. Read it carefully, then look around the congregation and ask the Holy Spirit to show you who has gifts to meet these needs. Then write in the name. Again return the form to me or the churchwardens. No need to add your name. The churchwardens and I will consider your suggestions and, if we believe it is right will act on them and approach those people we consider appropriate.

N Clews

19th February 2017

St James the Great, Woodhall and Waterloo